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Linguistic Meaning and Truth Conditions

1.1 Language and the world

It is an intuition shared by many, theorists and ordinary language users alike, that one of the core uses of language is the exchange of information about the world. In linguistics and the philosophy of language this intuition is generally captured by turning to the notions of truth and truth conditions to account for linguistic meaning. As Strawson (1971, p. 178) puts it:

it is a truth implicitly acknowledged by communication-theorists themselves that in almost all the things we should count as sentences there is a substantial central core of meaning which is explicable either in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of some related notion … .

The point this quote brings out very clearly is that, no matter what the background of a theorist – whether they are trying to say something about the meaning of words or sentences in themselves, or whether they are more interested in what speakers mean when they use words and sentences – sooner or later they find themselves (sometimes reluctantly) making use of the concepts of truth and truth conditions. Given that there are considerable differences in general outlook and basic assumptions among these theorists, it is truly remarkable that truth conditions have played (and still are playing) such an all-pervasive role.¹ As suggested above, the most likely explanation of this is that one, very central, way in which speakers use language is to say something about the world, to describe states of affairs, and considerations of truth or falsity seem to play an obvious role in describing the relation between representations and states of affairs in the world. However, for all their longevity
and all-pervasiveness, the precise role of truth and truth conditions in accounting for linguistic meaning is far from uncontroversial. In part, this is due to another fact observed by Strawson (and many others before and after him):

even sentences to which the notion of truth-conditions does seem appropriate may contain expressions which certainly make a difference to their conventional meaning, but not the sort of difference which can be explained in terms of their truth-conditions.

(Strawson, 1971, p. 177)

In other words, as soon as linguists or philosophers start to construct an account of natural language meaning in truth-conditional terms, they encounter linguistic elements that are undoubtedly meaningful, but whose meaning does not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterances in which they occur. It is on this type of expression that this book focuses. In broad terms, the aim of the book is to contribute to the debate on the relationship between language and the world. It explores different ways of construing this relationship and ultimately argues for an approach with a strong cognitive component, rather than a purely truth-based one. Linguistic expressions of the sort referred to in the second Strawson quote, what one could term ‘non-truth-conditional’ elements, are of particular interest in this debate because their existence means that truth-based theories of linguistic meaning can, at best, only account for a subclass (albeit a large one) of all meaningful linguistic devices. The rest of this chapter is devoted to a general discussion of the relationship between linguistic meaning and truth, and an introduction to the phenomenon of ‘non-truth-conditional’ linguistic expressions.

Before going any further, it is necessary to make it absolutely clear what kind of ‘non-truth-conditional’ meaning is at issue here: I am primarily interested in linguistic meaning, not in the more general communicative or ‘pragmatic’ meaning that arises in language use. This is best illustrated with an example. Consider, for instance, the scenario in (1):

(1) [Susan and Mary are talking about Mary’s boyfriend Peter]

Susan  Is he good at buying you presents?
Mary   For my last birthday he bought me a pink scarf, even though I told him that I hate pink.

In this scenario, Mary’s utterance will be true if and only if Peter bought her a pink scarf for her last birthday and (before that) she told him that